

**The Honorable Stephanie A. Gallagher**

United States District Judge

c/o Office of the Federal Defender

100 South Charles Street

Tower II, 9<sup>th</sup> Floor

Baltimore, MD 21021

14 July 2025

**Subject: Mark R. Unkenholz Sentencing**

**Dear Judge Gallagher,**

I am writing to share my personal experience with Mark Unkenholz, who I understand will stand before you soon for sentencing in a case involving the unauthorized disclosure of national security information. I was an employee of the National Security Agency (NSA) from June 1967 until my retirement from federal service in January 2005 as a Senior Executive. In my last assignment at NSA, I served as the Principal Director for Corporate Strategy, where I reported directly to the Director and Deputy Director of NSA and was responsible for oversight of all interactions with the technology providers in the U.S and global private sector on which the missions of NSA were dependent. After my retirement, my organization eventually merged into the Commercial Engagement Center, where Mark Unkenholz was employed at the time of his indictment.

I have known and worked with Mark Unkenholz since he joined NSA in the 1980's . In fact, when I joined NSA after graduating from college, I was assigned to work in an office that was headed by his father, Willard C. Unkenholz. Mark's brother Willard L. Unkenholz also joined the NSA sometime in the late 1970's and spent his career there as a crypto-mathematician. I had the privilege of working with all of them at various portions of my career at NSA, so it is fair to say I knew the family well and believed they were all committed to serving the NSA and the national security of United States in a serious way.

While I served as the Principal Director for Corporate Strategy, I was deeply exposed to Mark's work in engagement with commercial companies to stay abreast of emerging innovations and trends in technology, and preparing for their impact on the NSA mission areas. I found Mark to be very thoughtful and highly dedicated to his job and fulfilling his challenging role in supporting the NSA missions.

Engagement with the commercial technology innovators often involved sensitive discussions with companies that have no security clearances or cleared personnel of any kind. They were frequently concerned that even the most innocent discussions about their technology and products with NSA could damage their reputation in the marketplace and impact their business prospects, particularly with foreign customers. On many occasions, I personally saw Mark skillfully navigate through the maze of challenges required to establish meaningful discussions with the most innovative companies, without revealing any classified national security information or exposing the company in a negative way. I certainly held Mark and his dedication in the highest regard, as did all the other senior leaders at NSA. He did a difficult and complex job extremely well.

Since I had retired from NSA at the time, I cannot comment on the specific activities by Mark that led to his indictment for the charges he now is facing, but I was shocked to learn of his arrest. I understood he had long worked in a highly sensitive area that necessitated careful sharing of information to achieve cooperation and sometimes the rules for doing that were loosely defined on an ad hoc basis. Looking back on the situation, much of that reaction may have been triggered by Mark's use of an encrypted personal email account to maintain discretion with his counterpart in the private company, rather than an official NSA.GOV- labeled account which would have travelled over the open internet without encryption, and be easily identifiable. I strongly believe any perceived fault on Mark's part by the NSA authorities in doing this should certainly have been dealt with via administrative means and improvement of internal processes– not by a criminal felony indictment.

I would certainly hope that you consider my experience and thoughts above in your deliberations on the Pleading and Sentencing of Mark Unkenholz, and minimize any penalties involved.

Sincerely,

  
John C. Nagengast

Former Principal Director for Corporate Strategy  
National Security Agency

